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SUBJECT: KEY ISSUES IN FRANCE'S EU CONSTITUTION DEBATE

REF: A. (A) PARIS 2205

- [1](#)B. (B) PARIS 2006
- [1](#)C. (C) PARIS 1998
- [1](#)D. (D) PARIS 1649
- [1](#)E. (E) PARIS 1106
- [1](#)F. (F) PARIS 1014

SUMMARY

[1](#)1. (SBU) The direction taken by France's debate on the proposed EU Constitution has left many observers perplexed: what, if anything, do unemployment and loss of purchasing power, Turkey's possible accession to the EU, public service unions unhappy with proposed reforms to 35 hour work week, and widespread dissatisfaction with France's governing institutions have to do with a decision about a proposed Constitutional treaty for Europe? The debate over the Constitution has become a lightning rod for the electorate's discontent, and, for many voters, a plebiscite on Jacques Chirac's leadership. What follows are capsule descriptions of some of the issues that the French are talking about in the context of the Constitutional vote. END SUMMARY.

LATEST POLLS

[1](#)2. (SBU) According to a poll released April 12, the 'no' vote continues to hold its lead among those who have decided how they will vote -- by a margin of 53 percent to 47 percent. Between a fourth and a third of likely voters remain undecided, although there have been at least thirteen successive major polls since mid-March showing that a majority of those who say they have made up their minds plan to vote 'no'. When the 'no' overtook the 'yes' in the polls March 18, it energized the campaigns of each camp. Since then, as the debate has widened into TV appearances by leading advocates of both camps, the main issues motivating voters are becoming clear.

REFERENDUM AS PLEBISCITE ON CHIRAC

[1](#)3. (SBU) A number of constituencies -- for example, public sector employees in the transportation, health and education sectors, as well as some government research center academics and unionized workers in key ministries (including at the Foreign Ministry) -- militantly support voting 'no' because they are opposed to specific reforms proposed by the Raffarin government. The nationwide general strike on March 10 (reftel C), led by public sector unions revealed the range and variety of the constituencies opposed to specific reform proposals of the Raffarin government, and, beyond that, opposed to the economic liberalism and market mechanisms (timidly) implicit in these reforms. Many of these voters and their sympathizers are also intent on "voting against" Jacques Chirac and the Raffarin government for partisan reasons. Chirac now faces the real possibility that voters will take the opportunity of the referendum to answer an entirely different question -- whether the French people continue to have confidence in him. (The historical precedent, De Gaulle's failed referendum in 1969 which led to his political demise weighs heavily on the French President.) This evolution of the referendum into a plebiscite is getting additional impetus from a rising populist tide seeking to punish France's inaccessible, inbred, political class no matter what temples are brought down in the process.

THE "LIBERAL" VS. THE "SOCIAL" EUROPE AND FRANCE

[1](#)4. (SBU) Social and economic issues, particularly unemployment and loss of purchasing power, are principal preoccupations for some voters. The debate over the proposed Constitution (reftel A) has so far focused both on what to do about domestic social and economic problems and disagreement about how the Constitution might constrict France's options in dealing with them. This core disagreement over a "liberal" versus a "social" Europe and France catalyzed the French assault on the Bolkestein directive (reftel B). NOTE: In French usage, a "liberal" society is characterized by individualism, relatively unregulated markets, largely

private sector provision of social services, and low taxes; a "social" society is characterized by heavy regulation of markets and environment, state responsibility for health, education, etc. social services, and high taxes.) END NOTE. The outcry in France over the Bolkestein directive reflected both opposition to its "liberal bias" and to its imposition by an ever more "foreign" Brussels. "Social" opponents of the directive see it as epitomizing the proposed Constitution's "liberal bias." Concerns about an increasingly "foreign," liberal Europe are also often associated with a retrospective questioning of the EU's enlargement, which has reduced its political cohesion and its potential as an international political heavyweight.

WIDESPREAD 'NO' TO TURKEY

15. (SBU) Considerable anti-Constitution sentiment among voters is dominated by association of the proposed Constitution with fear of uncontrolled Muslim immigration from Turkey and worries over the headlong expansion of Europe. The issue of Turkey reflects France's continuing difficulties assimilating a large Muslim minority, widespread popular rejection of an expanded Europe, and popular resentment at not having been consulted about questions relating to the "European construction." According to a poll of the motivation of 'no' voters released March 26, 31 percent of those intending to vote 'no' say they plan do so primarily because they "are opposed to Turkey's entry into the EU."

DISMAY AT GOVERNMENT INEFFECTIVENESS

16. (SBU) Beyond dissatisfaction with current policies and partisan opposition to the current government, a deeper dismay at French institutions' inability to bring about reform and make progress solving France's problems is also fueling vote 'no' sentiment. Cutting across the entire electorate, there is disappointment at long-standing government ineffectiveness -- unemployment, for example, has hovered at around 10 percent since well before President Chirac's last re-election in 2002 -- which has led many to give up hope that politicians and politics can solve the problems that ordinary people consider the most important ones. May has traditionally been a month of political activism in France, prompting some 'yes' supporters to fear the worst: that diffuse but widespread unhappiness with the system as a whole could harden -- and be expressed as 'no' votes on May 29.

THE U.S. AND THE REFERENDUM DEBATE

17. (SBU) How the proposed Constitution would (or would not) in time make the EU an independent, political and military world power -- "equal to the U.S. and China" is the most common formulation -- comes up in the debate persistently but less prominently than had been expected. Contrary to the expectations, of the PS in particular, calling on voters to support the proposed Constitution because it makes for a "strong Europe facing the United States" has so far met with little traction (reftels D, E and F). If anything, the 'no' argument of both far-right "France First" sovereignist and far-left anti-Americans, that the proposed Constitution creates an "Atlanticist Europe dominated by the United States," has had a higher profile.

FRANCE'S LEADERSHIP ROLE IN EUROPE

18. (SBU) The effect on France's traditional leadership role in Europe, particularly damage to it should 'no' sentiment prevail, is becoming a key preoccupation of 'yes' voters. All pro-Constitution advocates, particularly President Chirac, Prime Minister Raffarin and their supporters in the press and parliament, stress that a 'no' victory May 29 would severely undermine France's traditional leadership role in Europe. It remains to be seen if appeals to vote 'yes' to continue France's influence in shaping Europe will outweigh widespread sentiment that the new Constitution represents the opposite -- ratification of an enlarged and enlarging Europe over which France has less and less of a political grip.

COMMENT

19. (SBU) France's debate over the proposed constitution has generated linkages for voters among very disparate questions -- with most having very little directly to do with the Constitution. It has done so as the country's social and economic problems have become more acute, and national confidence that they can be solved has diminished. We will elaborate further on these and other issues as the countdown continues towards Referendum Day, May 29. END COMMENT.
LEACH